



U.S. Department  
of Transportation  
**Federal Highway  
Administration**



U.S. Department  
of Transportation  
**Federal Transit  
Administration**

**Public Involvement for Transportation Decision-making**

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**SOUTH SACRAMENTO,  
CALIFORNIA,  
LIGHT RAIL TRANSIT/  
LA LINEA DEL SUR**

**September 1997**

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# FORWARD

One way to find out how to use public involvement techniques effectively is to learn from the experiences of others. **SOUTH SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA, LIGHT RAIL TRANSIT/LA LINEA DEL SUR**, describes proactive public involvement during project development in an area with large and diverse ethnic populations. It is one of three separate case studies of public involvement. The others are:

- **METROPLAN (LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS): "Pouring Water on Dry Ground,"** a mid-sized metropolitan planning organization using varied public involvement techniques to start involvement early in long range transportation planning.
- **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AT OREGON DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION,** a variety of public involvement experiences in both project development and statewide planning.

Copies of these case studies are available from:

Federal Highway Administration,  
Office of Environment and Planning HEP 30,  
400 7th Street SW, Washington, DC 20590.

Fax: (202) 366-3409  
Voice: (202) 366-2065

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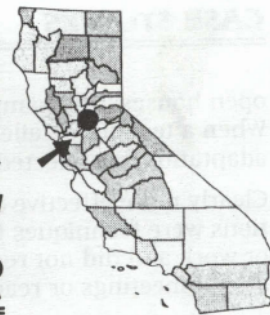
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# Case Study: SOUTH SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA, LIGHT RAIL TRANSIT/ LA LINEA DEL SUR



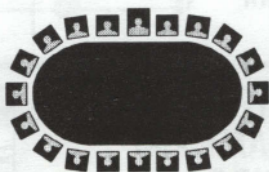
Sacramento, California's State capital, is not a tourist mecca in the same way San Francisco and Los Angeles are. Yet, in many of its physical and cultural characteristics, it's very much "California": people are spread out, distances are great, and everyone has a car.

In the face of growth projections that will further burden a highway system unable to expand, how does an agency get an auto-oriented culture such as Sacramento's interested in a new mode and enlist true support? Sacramento's transit agency, the Sacramento Regional Transit District (Regional Transit), through its South Sacramento Transit Alternatives Project, conducted a comprehensive and exciting public outreach program for project development and capitalized on the success of the region's first light rail starter line. The program engaged many people, attracted them enough to become committed to an extension of its basic system, and ultimately helped build a base of support for a light rail network from citizens willing to provide funding for transit.

Regional Transit's outreach program was fundamentally proactive and not fueled by controversy. Understanding that getting people interested in a relatively new mode of transportation would be a long-term task, Regional Transit started its outreach early to avoid delays and problems later. The outreach involved not only traditional environmental and transit groups but also those residents and workers in the study area who have few transportation options. The transit corridor studied has a large ethnic population including Chinese, Southeast Asian, African-American, and Hispanic people. Reaching out to these people and the general public without the threat of dissonance or controversy resulted in an extremely broad, sophisticated, and effective base of active support for transit and for securing transit funding.

## The public involvement program

From the beginning of the Transit Alternatives Study, the Regional Transit undertook a public involvement program that was multi-faceted, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual. Understanding that people learn and participate in different ways and with different styles, Regional Transit developed its outreach program to give people many ways to



provide input. As a result, Regional Transit effectively reached many people and diverse organizations, particularly those from ethnic neighborhoods and businesses, and kept them active in a long, complex planning project.

The program's basic elements were:

- maximizing input and guidance on technical issues through two advisory committees that met monthly;
- providing opportunities for input and an understanding of the decision-making process at community meetings and presentations; and
- providing a variety of ways to get information on the study and get interested in the outcome—such as multi-lingual newsletters, ads at transit stops, fliers, displays, and more.

Some of the broad variety of techniques Regional Transit used were innovative:

- ads on transit benches in the study-area communities;
- project information enclosed in student report card envelopes;
- multi-lingual Spanish, Chinese, and English project literature;
- interviews on ethnic radio stations;
- racks for project information in ethnic grocery stores;
- attendance at special ethnic events and festivals;
- a unique, catchy logo and theme used on all literature;
- written responses to comment cards received at all meetings; and
- "homework" assignments for members of the community advisory committee (CAC).

Others were traditional:

- community advisory committee;
- meeting fliers;
- hotline;
- fact sheets;
- comment cards; and
- newsletters.

Not everything Regional Transit did was successful at reaching or engaging people. Large public meetings or



## CASE STUDIES

open houses, for example, had disappointing attendance. When a technique failed, however, Regional Transit made adaptations or selected and implemented substitutes.

Clearly more effective and interesting for ethnic populations were techniques that reached people where they live or work and did not require them to go out of their way to attend meetings or read about the project:

- bench-board ads;
- information at local grocery stores;
- meetings hosted by local community groups;
- information included in the literature of ethnic chambers of commerce; and
- attendance at events in the neighborhoods.

Several key people involved in the study felt that these techniques worked particularly well because they indicated that Regional Transit understood that people acquire information and respond in various ways, some culturally influenced. They also showed that Regional Transit was sincere in its attempts to reach people who frequently are not asked to participate.

Participants felt that the overall process used to get input from the public and generate widespread awareness was successful and effective. Members of Regional Transit's advisory committees commented that the overall public involvement program in South Sacramento—and specifically the ethnic outreach—worked because the agency persevered and used a combination of new and standard techniques. Many said that Regional Transit asked for and got feedback and input from the range of interests, responded appropriately, dealt with “subsidiary” issues effectively, and gave ample opportunity to be closely involved or to comment in a variety of venues and styles. This required understanding how different people respond and what is needed to activate them, and realizing that the process itself must be flexible and responsive.

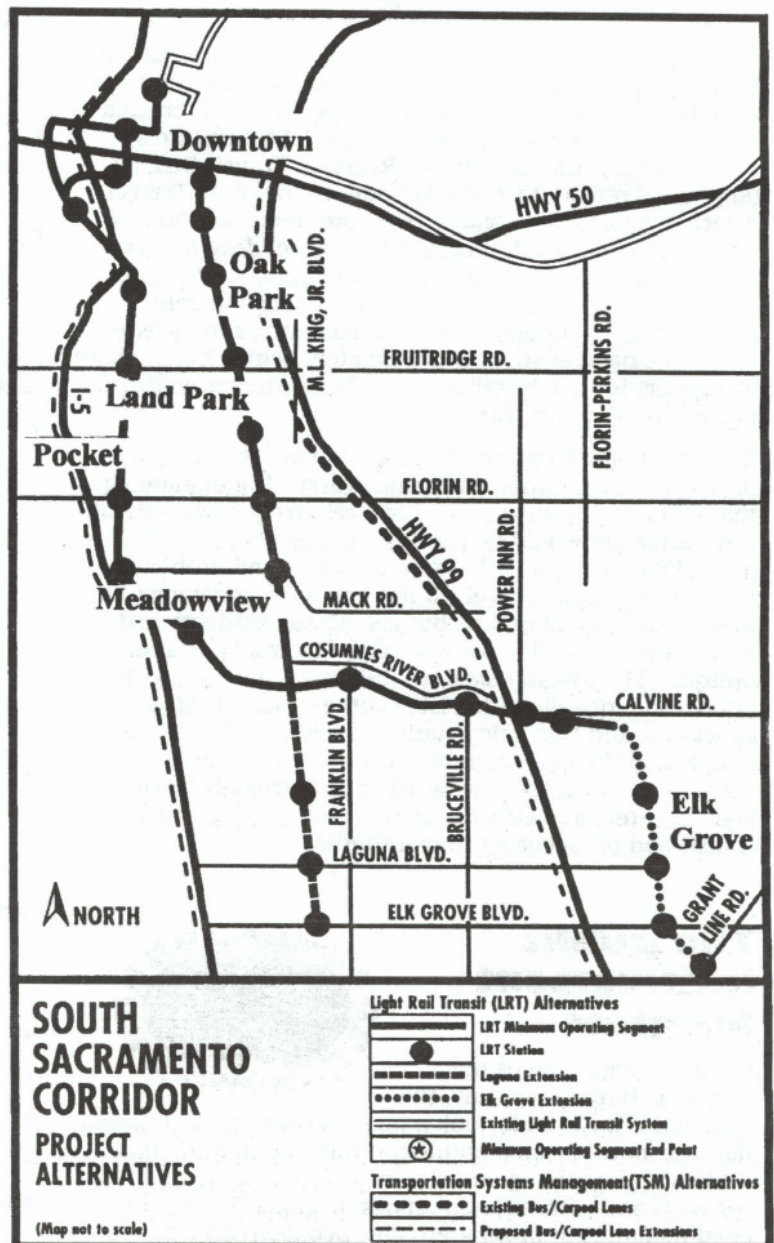
## About Sacramento and the project

Sacramento is 90 miles east of San Francisco. Now a city of 393,500 in a four-county metropolitan area of over 1.5 million people, Sacramento was founded as Sutter's Fort during the Gold Rush era. Not much gold was found, but the city prospered due to its productive agricultural resources. It has been the State capital since 1854. According to Regional Transit's project studies, State and Federal Governments have long

been major employers, along with agriculture and education. In recent years, the service and financial sectors and high-tech manufacturing have added to Sacramento's employment base. The population of Sacramento and the four-county region grew about 35 percent from 1980 to 1990. Similarly, the number of jobs in the Sacramento metropolitan area grew by 49 percent during this same period.

The South Sacramento corridor is about 15 miles long and 5 to 8 miles wide. More than 13 communities are located in the study area, many of them home to ethnic groups (see Figure 1). A significant portion of the regional labor

**Figure 1. South Sacramento corridor study area**





force lives in the growing South Sacramento corridor, but only 11 percent of the region's jobs are found there. Thus, many residents commute to work outside the corridor.

Employment projections for the year 2010 show substantial increases in jobs: 100 percent in the overall Sacramento region, 97 percent in the South Sacramento corridor, and 91 percent in downtown Sacramento. Given these projections, past commuting trends are very likely to continue. The ethnic neighborhoods in the South Sacramento area are dispersed throughout the corridor. The African-American population is concentrated primarily in the southern portion of the corridor and the Asian community primarily in the northeastern part of the corridor, while the Hispanic population is dispersed throughout the corridor. Median incomes vary widely; some census tracts have average incomes less than \$20,000; higher-income neighborhoods are located in the northwest (Land Park and Pocket neighborhoods) and in the newer areas of the southern part (Elk Grove and Laguna).

Most residents use their cars for work and other trips. Some 76 percent of the region's work trips were drive-alone trips, with 17.2 percent via carpool/vanpool. Although the percent of all work trips made by transit is relatively low in the region, the South Sacramento area has a significantly higher percentage of work trips by transit than the rest of the region.

## Transit in South Sacramento

It is not surprising that South Sacramento would have been an attractive corridor for transit investment, considering the magnitude of the projected growth in jobs in the Sacramento Central Business District, the inability to accommodate the anticipated new auto trips on the existing roadways, air quality mandates, and the need to address transit-service equity problems in the South Sacramento corridor. The Sacramento Area Council of Governments Metropolitan Transportation Plan calls for a wide range of transportation improvements over the next 20 years, including more public transit service and carpool lanes on freeways, among other things. Regional Transit, which runs the system's 60 bus routes, light rail line, seven park-and-ride lots, and a paratransit fleet, traded highway funds for transit and built the first of a regional system of light rail lines, 18.3 miles long, to the north and northeast.

Residents in transit-dependent South Sacramento who thought their neighborhoods should have gotten light rail first pushed and convinced Regional Transit that the next line should be the south line. This line would be able to meet Federal cost-effectiveness criteria based on high ridership and could successfully compete for discretionary Federal transit funding. The State would then be leveraging Federal dollars for economic development, transit equity, and social justice purposes by pursuing discretionary Federal transit funding. The "starter line" is considered a success, carrying over 23,000 weekday riders

after 13 years of operation. Following the Federal Transit Administration Systems Planning Study, in 1992 Regional Transit began the draft environmental impact analysis studies, a \$3.3 million analysis of transportation-investment options for the south corridor.

The South Sacramento Transit Alternatives Project environmental studies were initiated in June 1992, prior to the President's Executive Order on Environmental Justice and other regulations that explicitly require project sponsors to seek out the traditionally underserved. The technical environmental analysis and alternatives studies looked at seven transit investment alternatives: a baseline alternative (only committed and fully funded transit and highway projects); two transportation systems management alternatives (express buses on high-occupancy vehicle lanes); and four light rail transit alternatives on two existing railroad alignments.

Regional Transit conducted a public involvement process that went far beyond earlier efforts in both scope and intensity. For the south line, Regional Transit conducted a particularly open and impartial process, one that examined alternatives that were not necessarily being pushed by the agency or by any constituency. It reached out to neighborhoods that are not accustomed to having government come to them. It printed information in languages people in the neighborhoods could read. Regional Transit hired consultants who could speak Spanish and understood how to communicate clearly to the average person. It organized cohesive advisory committees and met with them monthly, responding to questions and challenges in a timely fashion.

Despite the relatively few requirements for public involvement, Regional Transit initiated a big and involved program. Regional Transit did so because it understood it was critical to deal not only with abutters or the traditional transit and environmental boosters but also with the larger community. It was clear to Regional Transit that, for a relatively new mode such as light rail to gain favor in Sacramento, it was important to reach out to a wide audience, because each light rail line was part of a much larger system of rail and bus facilities. Each line was viewed not as an isolated new transit start but as part of an overall network. Some members of one of the advisory committees said it was also clear that the outreach program needed to be developed, organized, and conducted to ensure that many people, inside and outside the corridor, understood the project and would become advocates for the line if funding issues became a question.

Finally, Regional Transit's project manager was personally aware that the people who would live with the transit line and benefit from it had to be involved in its planning and in steering Regional Transit in the right direction. She recognized that the planning process was an education, too—for both community representatives and Regional Transit.



boards were created and placed where there was heavy pedestrian traffic in the communities. These were bilingual Spanish/English and Chinese/English. All included the logo and hotline number. One commenter noted that one of the most innovative and effective things Regional Transit did was advertise on the backs of benches at 35 transit stops in the communities in the South Sacramento corridor (see Figure 2). The ads appeared where transit users went to the bus stop and were visible along major streets in the corridor. The prominent hotline number on the bench-board ads generated many phone calls.

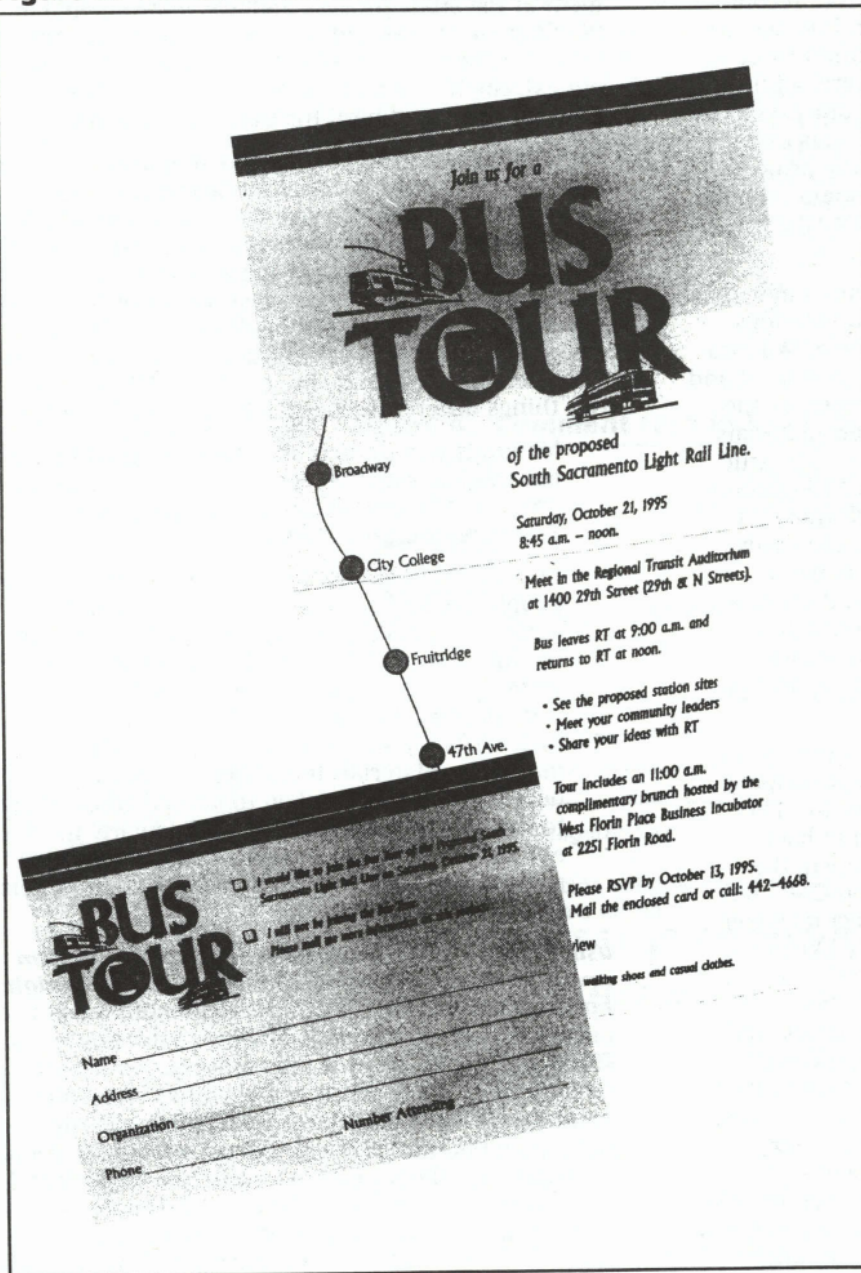
**Figure 2. Bench-board ad at a Regional Transit bus stop.**



- providing updates in newsletters** of Asian, African-American, and Hispanic chambers of commerce. Members of organizations, clubs, and associations often read literature from their organization more promptly than that from other groups. Regional Transit sent updates and information about the projects and meetings to the South Sacramento Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the Sacramento Black Chamber of Commerce, and others for inclusion in newsletters and for chamber leaders to use to update members at meetings. This kept business leaders up-to-date and enabled them to feel comfortable co-sponsoring a business leaders' reception later in the study process. Because the reception was a joint effort involving the chambers, they were committed to producing a good turnout. Participants felt that the reception itself led members and chamber leaders to a greater understanding of the project and a greater commitment to helping get the transit line built.
- attending and participating in special ethnic and community events** within neighborhoods, such as the annual Fiesta de la Familia, the Pacific Rim Street Festival, farmers' markets, and a Martin Luther King Day event. Regional Transit came out to meet people where they lived and played. Not only did the communities become exposed to the study, but some participants also thought the process gained credibility when community people saw agencies and consultants participate on weekends and holidays.
- conducting a bus tour** of the light rail corridor with local residents and agency representatives. The tour gathered CAC members and community, agency, and business leaders on a Saturday morning for a three-hour ride along the proposed alignment. This provided an opportunity for residents and others to talk to Regional Transit representatives on their own home turf and on their free time (not during working hours). The bus tour was treated as a meeting, complete with official invitations, response cards, comment cards, and a detailed summary document (see Figure 3). Many felt that the attractive invitations and the lunch provided by a business in the corridor made the event a serious opportunity for input and discussion.
- encouraging CAC members to disseminate materials and information** and getting these representatives from various neighborhoods to invite local residents to meetings and events. CAC members disseminated information and invited local residents to meetings and events. Regional Transit shifted its approach partway through the study to get more people involved. Although the outreach program had, from the start, been organized around the community group and neighborhood associations, the shift involved using the CAC members representing neighborhood organizations to actively disseminate materials and information. Regional Transit also gave CAC members "homework" assignments to set up community meetings, distribute fliers, and the like. CAC members were also asked to "bring" a certain number of people to meetings hosted by community organizations—and many did, increasing attendance significantly.
- meeting with key neighborhood leaders** at the beginning of the process in familiar locations within their neighborhood. These meetings were conducted in comfortable, familiar places where the interviewer was the guest. For some from cultures quite different from those in the United States, going to a government office or public meeting to talk with an official representative of the government and give input is not second nature and may be uncomfortable. Meeting with someone in one's own neighborhood, talking with people riding the bus, or chatting with neighbors walking down the street is considerably less threatening and more productive. Other innovations included:
- a logo/theme.** Regional Transit developed a catchy logo and theme—"A Moving Issue"—to help give a special identity to the study and make it easy for people to understand and remember it. All materials produced carried this logo and theme.
- cultural sensitivity.** CAC members, who were among the most involved in the study process, said hiring a bilingual, minority consultant (Spanish-English) to work on the outreach program was very important to getting an early start on knowing the community leaders and issues. The consultant's understanding of cultural as well as language differences was critical to breaking down ethnic barriers and made securing Chinese translators and transcribers easier. The bilingual consultant was experienced in the community and, as a minority person, was able to empathize with many



Figure 3. South Sacramento Corridor bus tour invitation.



of those Regional Transit was trying to reach. For example, the consultant understood that “unassimilated” persons are often not comfortable showing up at a meeting they heard about “anonymously” on the radio or about which they received a mailing. But they might respond to a bilingual flier placed under the doormat on their porch, showing that the agency cared enough to go out to the neighborhood and walk around to individual houses. Similarly, the consultant was able to provide insight into ways ethnic groups affiliate and organize, which is often different from

the way other groups do. The minority consultant’s use of church affiliations proved an effective way to reach ethnic groups due to the strength and credibility of ethnic church organization, which is stronger than in many other churches. The CAC felt that having this consultant on-board from the beginning showed that Regional Transit wanted to make no mistakes—and thus gave the process credibility.

- **public acknowledgment of the CAC.** Publicity about the CAC and its composition—through printing members’ names and affiliations on project literature—helped elevate the CAC and legitimize the process; in particular, it lent credibility to the ethnic outreach. Listing all 40 CAC members, along with the Regional Transit officials and Federal officials, on a newsletter boosted the CAC’s sense of importance and responsibility. Also, members were treated to a holiday party at each December CAC meeting and given certificates of appreciation at the end of the environmental studies process, acknowledging their participation and hard work in a public way
- **multi-lingual newsletters** that included a questionnaire on interests and concerns about transportation. Created for the scoping sessions, these provided feedback to Regional Transit. Later editions included a glossary of terms, basic project facts, a list of ways to contact someone to comment or get information, and other features.
- **unique articles**—in addition to standard press releases—for the ethnic media, emphasizing everyday concerns as well as long-range issues.

Equally important as innovative techniques were the common, “traditional” public involvement techniques that were executed particularly well. These included:

- **organizing a CAC that was representative, active, organized, and energized.** Regional Transit formed the CAC at the start of project development. Although many participants felt that CACs are common as advisory bodies, they stated that the Transit Alternatives Project CAC was unique in its cohesiveness and focus. Regional Transit made sure it had all the key people on the CAC: neighborhoods, business leaders, major employers in the study area, et al. It was critical to get the CAC as well-formed as possible



Many CAC members in particular thought the public involvement process created intense **commitment** from the agency and the community to the public process and the project. Working together on the CAC and in affected communities helped create a shared sense of ownership of the study and made Regional Transit even more committed to creating an excellent rail line with sure service and good design. Community people spent two years together on the CAC, at community meetings, festivals, writing articles for local newspapers, and wading through technical material. A commitment to the public outreach process and to seeing new transportation improvements flowed naturally from this effort.

Results beyond the process also contributed to building commitment. Several CAC members had little or no knowledge or understanding about the transportation needs or the economic development needs of other areas. Working together on the CAC helped bring about a broader understanding of each others' needs and concerns.

Several key CAC leaders involved in other aspects of the study also stated that one of the most significant outcomes of the public involvement process is that Regional Transit now has a strong group of **supporters** who are knowledgeable, reasonable, and articulate when it comes to transit planning and funding issues. These former CAC members—many of whom are “average Joes,” business leaders, and member of institutions—are credible spokespersons for Regional Transit and transit in the Sacramento region. Former CAC members have written articles and sent videotaped appeals to every Federal legislator for funding support for the South Sacramento line. The process educated thousands about the benefits of transit improvements and gained supporters along the way.

### Applicability to other projects

The successful elements of Regional Transit's efforts in the South Sacramento Transit Alternatives Project appear to be easily transferrable to studies and projects. Most of what was done can be done in other cities and towns, because Sacramento's success was due largely to attitude and the ability to see the long-term benefits of getting people involved in a meaningful way. The techniques used, procedures incorporated, and overall approach are not staggeringly innovative—just good work from committed people and a supportive agency.

For example, many studies and projects throughout the country use CACs for input. This technique can be made more effective by using the Sacramento model for a CAC that created a truly representative CAC with ethnic-group involvement from the beginning and empowered its members to become leaders in their own communities and in the city as a whole.

Many studies and projects produce materials but often aren't as effective, because the distribution system is weak. Some people interviewed felt that the Sacramento

approach of finding the perfect location for the materials, identifying someone to “monitor” the supply, and following up made a big difference.

While the ethnic outreach process did not serve to significantly alter the alignment or other key features of the project, Regional Transit found it effective in making a lot of people aware that Regional Transit was planning transportation improvements, letting them know that information about most aspects of the project could be obtained, and building a broad-based constituency for the project. This resulted in many forceful and unified positive voices from many different neighborhoods and organizations at the project's public hearing. This support has carried through the remaining environmental impact analysis studies and preliminary engineering phases and into funding discussions with the Federal Government. Without the support of strong minority groups within the neighborhoods, this project may have very well foundered. It could have easily lacked support from local legislators and languished due to a reluctance to allocate local taxes to construct the project.

### ??? For further information:

Debra Jones, Project Manager  
Regional Transit  
1400 29th Street  
Sacramento, CA 95812-2110  
(916) 321-2870

Pilar Montoya, Consultant  
2115 J Street, #201  
Sacramento, CA 95816  
(916) 444-1181

